

# Religions and Development Research Programme

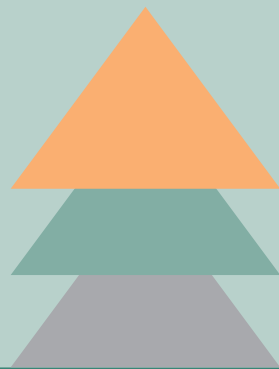
## Religious Studies and Development: A Literature Review

**Emma Tomalin**

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Leeds

Research Associate, RaD Research Programme



Working Paper 6 - 2007

**RaD**

# Religions and Development

## Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

# Religions and Development Working Paper 6

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**Emma Tomalin**

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Leeds

Research Associate, RaD Research Programme

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# 1 Introduction

This literature review will begin with a section on method and theory in religious studies. Although the Religions and Development research programme is concerned with the intersection between religion and development, it has not been conceived as a 'religious studies' project *per se*. However, the debates around method and theory that have occurred within the discipline do offer useful insights into the issues that arise when deciding how to study people's religious beliefs and practices. While religious studies scholars employ many of the same methodological and analytical tools as scholars in other disciplines, an important focus within method and theory discussions has been the viability of religious studies as a separate discipline. The contours of this discussion are of interest to this programme because they address the key issue of what it is to study 'religion' as a non-believer or outsider. The approach that is adopted depends very much upon the way in which one feels that religious phenomena should be treated. There has been a tension between scholars who adopt 'naturalistic'<sup>1</sup> explanations for religious phenomena and those who argue that it is intellectually indefensible for the 'outsider' to comment upon the origin or truth of religious experience and knowledge, as it is a fundamentally personal affair. While the latter standpoint has historically been that which has defined religious studies methodology (the *phenomenological* method) and has been used to defend the existence of religious studies as a separate discipline (i.e. its distinct subject matter is private religious experiences which cannot be reduced to foreign categories), we do also find religious studies scholars who are sympathetic to the naturalistic or constructionist perspective. In reality, what we find is that scholars lie along a spectrum within two 'extreme' positions. At one extreme we find those 'naturalists' who "repudiate the view that there exists or could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation" (Danto, 1967, p 448 cited in McCutcheon, 1997, p ix) and at the other, those 'phenomenologists' who take all expressions of religion at face value and only engage in describing the subject's account, to avoid any reductionist analysis.

It is also important to note that, whilst there has been much debate and discussion about what is definitive about 'religious studies' as a discipline (when compared, in particular, to theology, the sociology of religion and the anthropological study of religion), in reality it is often difficult in practice to maintain a clear distinction between these different approaches. There are two further literature reviews within this working paper series that deal with sociological and anthropological approaches to religion and international development. Thus, where this review may seem to omit material, this is to avoid repetition across the working paper series. Moreover, it can also be difficult to get much of a sense of 'religious studies' as a whole, with some scholars and academic departments clearly

locating themselves within the phenomenological method and others taking a more textual and historical approach (the 'history of religions'). The theoretical and methodological discussion presented in Section 2 is not intended to argue that religious studies *should* always clearly resemble this model but to introduce readers to key arguments and debates that have a broader relevance to researching religion across disciplines.

The second part of this paper will then look at some of the ways in which religious studies scholars have investigated the influence of religious values and organisations upon social, economic and political change in developing countries. This will not be an exhaustive survey (the literature is large), but it will indicate areas of interest that can then be followed up with respect to other religious traditions or regions. In addition, the main focus of this review will be on the regions of interest to this research programme: sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

While religious studies has made a significant contribution to research concerned with the relationship between religion and social, political and economic change in developing countries, there has been much less emphasis on the intersection between religion and international development specifically. I have found no books and only a handful of articles that address this relationship directly (e.g. Bradley, 2005; Selinger, 2004; Tomalin, 2006a). Although much of the research carried out within religious studies on gender or human rights, for example, has relevance for development, the link has not been explicitly made. For instance, there are many studies concerned with the ways in which religion can oppress women but the relationship of this research to development concerns is not specified. Nor has there been any sustained attempt to join research on religion and human rights with studies on rights-based approaches to development (Tomalin, 2006a). Thus, the material produced within religious studies offers a resource for our current programme but cannot provide much in the way of case studies that directly address the issue of international development.



## 2 Theory and method<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1 The discipline of religious studies: marking out its territory

Religious studies emerged as a discipline in the 1960s to create space for the 'secular study of religion'. It sought to distinguish itself from theology, "traditionally regarded as an insider discourse" (Flood, 1999, p 18), through adopting a "'non-confessional approach' which tried to treat religions as key dimensions of human culture which can be understood in ways akin to other discipline's understandings of their objects" (Flood, 1999, p 18). Whereas theology was confined to the Christian tradition<sup>3</sup>, was carried out by 'insiders' and rested upon an acceptance of the truth claims of the tradition, religious studies had as its object all religious traditions, and was proclaimed to be founded upon the "value-free exploration of religious meaning and institutions" (1999, p 19). As Flood writes "the language of theology is a language which *expresses* religion whereas the language of religious studies is a language *about* religion" (1999, p 20).

The intellectual basis for this 'scientific' study of religion (as opposed to theology) is a legacy of scholarly developments since the eighteenth century, particularly within anthropology, sociology, psychology and philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Scholars provided both functional (what religion *does*) and substantive/essentialist (what religion *is*) definitions of religion<sup>5</sup>; they sought to explain the nature of religious phenomena (often reducing their causes to social or psychological rather than 'supernatural'); and they contributed to a body of literature which generated new knowledge about religious belief and practice across the globe. The writings of early anthropologists such as Tyler (1832-1917), Malinowski (1884-1942) and Evans Pritchard (1902-1973), as well as the more recent work of Clifford Geertz (1926-) or Mary Douglas (1921-), have influenced the way in which religion is studied across cultures today. Alongside this anthropological interest in so-called 'primitive' religions we also find the emergence of 'orientalist' scholarship, drawing upon philology, classics and history, which sought to document and understand the 'high' religious traditions that were encountered in the colonies. For instance, scholars such as Sir William Jones (1746-1794), H.T. Colebrooke (1765-1837), Max Muller (1923-1900) and T.W. Rhys Davids (1943-1922) have had a profound impact upon the way in which Hinduism and Buddhism are studied in the west.<sup>6</sup>

The German scholar Max Muller had a particular influence upon the emergence of what we now call religious studies. He called for a new comparative and non-confessional scientific study of religion – *religionswissenschaft*. Other key figures in the emergence of religious studies as a discipline rather than just subject matter are the historians of religion Joachim Wach (1898-1955) and Mircea Eliade

(1907-1986). All these scholars, however, maintained that the subject matter of religious studies was itself unique and was not reducible to the categories of the social sciences. Religious studies owes much to this cumulative intellectual legacy, which promoted 'religions' as a category for academic enquiry and developed theories and methodological approaches to aid understanding of religious phenomena.

## 2.2 Religious studies and the phenomenological approach

There were a growing number of scholars who argued that religious studies not only needed to distinguish itself from theology but also from the 'reductionism' of the social and biological sciences. They argued that to enter into research on religious phenomena with the mindset that people were ultimately 'mistaken' in their understanding of certain experiences as 'religious' (i.e. of a divine or supernatural origin) failed to do justice to the experiences that were being described (see, for instance, the work of Smart, 1973; 1977; 1978; 1996). Moreover, this band of scholars also objected to the 'Eurocentric' tendencies of anthropological and 'orientalist' accounts of religion when they implied that such traditions were inferior to, or to be contrasted with, the Christian tradition. The challenge facing 'religious studies' was to develop a methodology that was capable of two things. Firstly, it needed a methodology that enabled the production of scholarly reflection upon *all* religious traditions on their own terms, but by researchers who stood 'outside' the religious traditions they were studying (unlike theology, where theologians were 'insiders'). Secondly, it was deemed important that this method should remain agnostic about the truth of religious beliefs, since to reduce them to naturalistic explanations was to take something away from the religious subject's account and to affirm them would imply a theological position.

To meet this challenge, a *phenomenological* methodology had become popular by the 1960s. This demanded that the researcher 'bracket' his/her own interpretation of religious phenomena and instead endeavour to enter into 'empathy' with believers in order to describe and understand their religious beliefs and actions. This empathetic position, it was argued, would allow the researcher to describe as closely as possible what the religion means to the believer (*eidetic vision*). Ninian Smart,<sup>7</sup> the founder of the first religious studies department in the UK, at Lancaster University in the early 1960s, has been one of the most prominent supporters of this methodological approach. He describes the phenomenological method as

“the use of *epoche* or suspension of belief, together with the use of empathy, in entering into the experiences and intentions of religious participants... This implies that, in describing the way people behave, we do not use, so far as we can avoid them, alien categories to evoke the nature of their acts and to understand those acts... In this sense phenomenology is the attitude of informed empathy. It tries to bring out what religious acts mean to the actors” (1996, p. 2).

Sutcliffe suggests that “when and where Religious Studies has flourished institutionally over the last thirty-five years, it would seem that a broadly ‘phenomenological’ methodology has served to maintain a more-or-less distinctive methodological base line or common ground, although this has not always been explicit” (2004, p xxii).<sup>8</sup> As Erricker writes,

“the notion of a phenomenological study of religion was really an attempt to justify the study of religion on its own terms rather than on the terms of the theologian or the social scientist. The sentiment behind this was and still is liberal in character, arguing for the importance of equal consideration being given to different ‘religious cultures’, whether past or present, empathizing with and seeking to understand the viewpoints of different traditions across the spectrum of religious practices and constructing a case for the importance of the study of religious within the academic world” (1999, p 83).<sup>9</sup>

From the point of view of studying diverse religious cultures on their own terms, the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, as Bocking argues, “rather splendidly challenged Eurocentrism well in advance of most other subjects” (2004, p 108). While this was undoubtedly seen as a welcome contrast to the Eurocentric ‘orientalist’ construction of religious traditions that emerged from within colonial encounters, the extent to which this method successfully bridges the gap between theology and social sciences, in the ‘value-free’ way that it wants to, has been challenged (see Fitzgerald, 2000 and McCutcheon, 1997).

## 2.3 Critiques of the phenomenological approach in religious studies

Much of the critique of the phenomenological approach to religious studies rests upon the extent to which this method distinguishes the discipline from theology. It is argued that the ‘methodological agnosticism’ (agnosticism about the truth claims or origins of religions) that dominates religious studies is, after all, a theological standpoint. The phenomenological method treats religion as *sui generis* (a thing of its own type, which cannot be explained in terms of other phenomena), which implies an acceptance of the claims made by believers (Fitzgerald, 2000; McCutcheon, 1997, 1999).

Fitzgerald considers that this reliance upon a notion of religion as *sui generis* is a thinly disguised “ecumenical liberal theology” (2000, p 7). He argues that the phenomenological approach to religion actually implies a ‘theological’ commitment after all, since it implicitly supports a non-naturalistic explanation for religious phenomena. Thus, religious studies is considered to be ‘crypto-theology’ and critics argue that it then becomes unclear why it should remain a separate discipline with its own unique methodology. Fitzgerald, for instance, argues that “religious studies be rethought and represented as cultural studies” (2000, p 10) and McCutcheon<sup>10</sup> suggests that religious studies scholars should abandon their claim to have a unique methodology (which is based upon the notion of *sui generis* religion) and should instead invest in “developing interdisciplinary connections with their colleagues in the social sciences” (1997, p 201).<sup>11</sup>

However, for such critics, the problem is not just that the phenomenological method is implicitly theological, but as Shaw writes, “by making it [*sui generis* religion] central to their discourse, scholars in the history of religions are effectively insulated from uncomfortable questions about standpoint and privilege” (1995, p 70). McCutcheon is similarly concerned that this privileging of the category ‘religion’ as effectively ‘sociopolitically autonomous’ has made it difficult for religious studies to engage with the ways in which religious traditions are implicated in maintaining difference and exploitation (1997, p 4). He writes that religious studies scholars are “like their Christian Theological predecessors who claimed the Christian message to be equally autonomous and unique, they are effectively insulated from political and historical analysis” (1997, p 4). He writes that

“the implications of exclusively constructing religion in this one manner...effectively segments people from their complex sociopolitical and historical relationships and contributes to manufacturing a cultural context conducive to such segmentation. Although it is possible, even probable, that a significant number of the global population find the poverty suffered by large segments of the global population and the tremendous wealth of others to be reprehensible, the consequence of one of their primary suppositions (that certain aspects of human life are free from the taint of sociopolitical interactions) shares in a strategic marginalization of historical humans” (1997, p 23).

Thus, in treating the accounts of religious subjects as beyond scrutiny (*sui generis*) the phenomenology of religion avoids comment upon the social, economic or political contextuality of religious phenomena. In trying to understand what religious acts mean to the believer, the focus shifts away from religions as products of particular contexts, in terms of how they have been shaped by

external factors as well as the influence that they have upon the those factors in turn (McCutcheon 1997, p 62). So, for instance, a gender analysis of religion would be discouraged by an 'extreme' phenomenological method (King, 1995). This failure to contextualise religion in order to avoid reductionism lends further weight to the claim that the phenomenological method in the study of religion is 'crypto-theology'. Where the primary aim of religious studies is to get as close as possible to the religious understanding of the believer, critics can be forgiven for wondering where the line is between empathy and sympathy.

## 2.4 Moving beyond the phenomenological method in religious studies?

While some scholars of religion may choose to engage in this purely reconstructive and descriptive work (and perhaps, as McCutcheon and Fitzgerald suggest, they *are* really theologians), other scholars of religion do engage in analysis and contextualisation. Oberoi (1994), for instance, argues that researchers should not just view the accounts of insiders as in need of description and scholarly systematization and simply reproduce them. Instead, they must be aware of how religious views may be powerful social, political and ideological tools. For instance, a recent edited volume (Connolly, 1999) includes several chapters written by scholars of religious studies 'schooled' in the phenomenological method, where they reflect upon its benefits, as well as its theoretical and methodological limitations. While many of these studies are critical of an 'unreconstructed' phenomenological method, they are sympathetic to retaining, as one methodological tool, "the attentive and detailed *description* of the phenomena packaged as 'religion'...[and] paying close attention to the 'believer's own account' as part of the explanatory process" (Sutcliffe, 2004, p xxiii).

However, Sutcliffe emphasises that the subjective accounts of believers also "require social, cultural and historical contextualization if adequate analysis is to be achieved" (2004, p xxvi) and that, in drawing on various methodologies (historical, textual, ethnographic etc.), "qualitative approaches construct religion not as an ahistorical essence...but as a 'social formation'...embedded in and generated by particular cultural and political contexts and essences" (2004, p xxvii). This extra 'hermeneutical step' is now common within religious studies, which routinely draws upon critical methodologies developed outside the discipline of religious studies, including gender analysis, post-colonial critiques and, increasingly, postmodern thought. The volume edited by Sutcliffe (2004) gives a

good insight into the way in which contemporary scholars of religion place an emphasis upon description *and* interpretive analysis.

## 2.5 Is religious studies a separate discipline?

While religious studies scholars increasingly defend themselves against the charge that they consider religion to be *sui generis* (i.e. that they reject naturalistic explanations for religious phenomena and consider religion to be immune to socio-political analysis)<sup>12</sup>, they still find themselves vulnerable to this critique in seeking out 'religious' phenomena in the first place.<sup>13</sup> There continues to be a strong defence of the idea that, even if we can ultimately reduce religious phenomena to naturalistic and social causes, they nonetheless warrant classification as a distinct realm of human experience, which justifies the existence of a separate discipline: 'religious studies' (see Sutcliffe, 2004). In contrast, the work of Fitzgerald challenges the intellectual basis for the existence of a separate discipline called religious studies, since he argues that the very notion of religion has been constructed, reflecting theological categories about what a religion should be. He suggests that "the more the researcher distances himself or herself from the explicit or implicit theological domination of 'religion', adopting instead sociological or anthropological critical perspectives, the more irrelevant the concept of religion will become" (2000, p 8).

For Fitzgerald, then, the phenomenological method in religious studies is itself already guilty of imposing alien categories onto so-called 'religious' phenomena in calling them 'religious' in the first place. Fitzgerald (2000) presents a detailed account of the emergence of religious studies as founded upon the fallacy of the category 'religion' as a legitimate cross-cultural tool of analysis. He argues that "religion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life" (2000, p 4). He suggests that 'religious' phenomena have such different meanings in different cultures that when we attempt to understand them in their locality, the category 'religious' becomes meaningless and we are instead faced with phenomena which are better understood as political, social or anthropological.

Thus, the category of religion distorts the very phenomena it seeks to understand. He writes that "the construction of 'religion' and 'religions' as global, cross-cultural objects of study has been part of a wider historical process of western imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Part of this process

has been to establish an ideologically loaded distinction between the realm of religion and the realm of the non-religious or the secular” (2000, p 8). He continues: “I am particularly concerned with the use of the word ‘religion’ in studies of non-western value systems and cultures. I believe that it is in these contexts that we can most easily see how a western concept...is continually being foisted on non-western societies even though its application is so obviously problematic” (2000, p 9). He proposes religious studies should “be rethought and re-represented as cultural studies, understood as the study of the institutions and the institutionalized values of specific societies, and the relation between those institutionalized values and the legitimation of power” (2000, p 10).<sup>14</sup>

The observation in this introduction to this review that it is often difficult to differentiate religious studies research from research on religion carried out in other disciplines would seem to support this methodological critique that ‘religious studies’ is an invention and an artificial discipline. However, the creation of religious studies was also an attempt to pay serious academic attention to religious phenomena in society, which reflected different concerns to theology and was more interested to understand what religion meant to believers than to explain its function or origins. For this reason, religious studies has tended to approach religion with a different set of concerns to politics or sociology. When religious studies scholars no longer concern themselves just with the descriptive and ‘phenomenological’ aspect of the study of religions, it does become more difficult to distinguish their work from that of scholars in other disciplines. Nevertheless, as I will suggest below, religious studies scholars are generally more interested in the context of religious belief and practice than with its structural and functional dimensions, which might concern sociologists or political scientists. However, as Sutcliffe suggests, because religious studies now draws upon a range of methodologies, we should adopt “a view of the study of religion as a ‘field’ akin to thematic or area studies...rather than a self-contained discipline” (2004, p xviii). I propose to adopt this broader approach in the selection of the literature reviewed below. Thus, not all of the work I review will be ‘religious studies’ research, in terms of being clearly located within the methodological framework outlined above.

## 3 Themes

### 3.1 Introduction

Having reviewed some of the literature dealing with the main methodological issues and controversies in the study of religion, I will now discuss the ways in which literature within religious studies has addressed issues of concern to this research programme. There are two points to be made before I proceed. Firstly, it is important to note that in books written by scholars of religion, as well as in religious studies journals, international development is rarely addressed directly. However, there are many studies that are directly concerned with themes and issues that are of relevance to development. These include, for instance, research on the relationship of religion to environmentalism, social change or social difference. The relevant body of literature is large and for that reason I will limit my review to a consideration of religion and social difference (focussing upon religion and violence, religion and human rights, and religion and gender).

Secondly, religious studies is fundamentally interdisciplinary, drawing upon methods and theories from within both the humanities and the social sciences. While there are bespoke religious studies journals, religious studies scholars also publish across the humanities and social sciences. Religious studies scholars, therefore, research and write about areas that will be dealt with in other literature reviews. It is for this reason also that I have felt it necessary to restrict the scope of this review to a consideration of 'religion and social difference'. Because 'religion' is the common theme, it can be difficult to isolate research undertaken within religious studies from other disciplines. I have suggested above that religious studies has developed a particular methodological approach to the study of religion (although this is not always easy to identify). Another distinction which is sometimes made between religious studies and approaches to religion in political science or sociology, for instance, is that the scholar of religion is more interested in the content and nature of particular religious traditions, and how that impacts upon political or social change, than upon the broader structural or functional dimensions of religious traditions. Religious studies scholars are *more likely* to ask questions about (and to be informed about) the nature of religious belief or the content of particular texts and their interpretations. This is not a hard and fast distinction, but I think that it is useful in highlighting differences in emphasis that one would typically find between different approaches to the study of religion.



## 3.2 Religion and social difference

Understanding the role that religion plays in producing and maintaining social difference in various contexts has a clear relevance to development thinking: it can exacerbate social and political tensions and circumscribe development opportunities. Religion can maintain social difference within societies/communities (e.g. the caste system in India<sup>15</sup> or gender difference), as well as between different societies/communities (e.g. various styles of religiously based nationalism or racialised politics<sup>16</sup>). This section will look at religion and violence, religion and human rights, and religion and gender (including an examination of literature that looks at the emergence of various styles of 'religious feminism' as well as studies interested in women's opportunities for leadership within religious traditions. With respect to links between gender and religion, there is a body of literature which suggests that, although religious traditions are frequently oppressive towards women, this is a product of patriarchal culture rather than the religious tradition itself. Instead, it is argued that the reinterpretation of religious traditions to encourage women's empowerment is a crucial element of women's development in countries where religions continue to exert cultural, social and political influence.

### 3.2.1 Religion, violence and human rights

In India, communal violence between Hindus and Muslims has received attention from scholars who are interested in the ways in which Hinduism and Islam have been interpreted to provide support for the emergence of a violent political campaign against members of other religious traditions (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000; Hansen, 1999; Zavos, 2002). Islam, in particular, has also received much attention in the literature on 'fundamentalism'<sup>17</sup> as well as more recent studies that focus upon the links between religion and terrorism/violence (Girard, 2005).<sup>18</sup> Understandings of concepts such as *Jihad*, *Hindutva* or *Ramrajya*<sup>19</sup> – which are rooted in particular interpretations of Islam and Hinduism – are important in understanding how religion is used to demonise the 'other'. There is also literature that looks at the Buddhist tradition and violence. A recently volume edited by Deegalle (2006), for instance, explores the relationship of Buddhism to ethnic conflict in contemporary Sri Lanka. It investigates the role that Buddhist institutions might play in resolving conflict, as well as the ways in which they may actually heighten tensions.

Similarly, in Africa religion has been complicit in underpinning violence and political marginalisation. Particular interpretations of religion have been used to bolster ethnic divisions and justify violence

(Cobban, 2005; Ellis, 1997; Ellis, 2006; Lovejoy and Williams, 1997; Spalding, 2000). There is also a body of literature that discusses acts of violence committed against those who are believed to be possessed with evil spirits, based upon beliefs and practices found within African Traditional Religion, as well as the use of sorcery to afflict enemies (Ashforth, 2005; Hackett, 2003; Kohnert, 1996).

There is, however, also an emergent literature that investigates the role of religion in conflict resolution and reconciliation (Appleby, 2000; Gopin, 2000; Johnston and Sampson, 1994; Johnston, 2003; Thomas, 2005). This debate has largely taken place within international relations and peace studies rather than religious studies. One area that relates to the positive role that religious traditions can play in building harmonious societies, and which has received attention from within religious studies, is human rights. A very useful article which reviews a number of recent volumes on religion and human rights is David Little's 'Rethinking human rights: a review essay on religion, relativism and other matters' (1999). Studies in this area have focussed upon the ways in which religious traditions both contradict modern understandings of human rights (e.g. where religious traditions hold values that go against women's human rights) as well as correspond to them (e.g. An-Na'im, 1992; An-Na'im et al. 1995; Bauer and Bell, 1999; Bloom et al. 1996; Jacobsen and Bruun, 2000; Mayer, 1994). In particular, the so-called 'Asian values' debate (which argues that Asian values do not correspond to western human rights but do offer a viable basis for social ethics – e.g. see Bauer and Bell, 1999)<sup>20</sup> has given rise to a flood of publications. In March 1993 a regional meeting for Asia<sup>21</sup> was organised in Bangkok to pre-empt the Vienna *World Conference on Human Rights*, to be held in June of that year. Article 8 of the *Bangkok Declaration* reads:

'While human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds.'<sup>22</sup>

The participating states argued that, although they recognise that all humans have rights, the exact nature of those rights or the way in which they are expressed must vary according to the historical, cultural or religious context.<sup>23</sup> The sub-text to the *Bangkok Declaration* is a belief that the drawing up of the UDHR had been undertaken without the participation of 'Asian' states and that it needed to be updated and revised to reflect their input (Waltz, 2001, 2002).<sup>24</sup> In particular, it was pointed out that the wording and intention of much of the *Universal Declaration* was based upon western understandings

of individuality and autonomy that do not necessarily reflect traditional 'Asian values' (Cumaraswamy, 1997). Unsurprisingly, the *Bangkok Declaration* has been criticised for only "paying lip-service to widely accepted principles of human rights" (Lee, 1997, p 1) and resulting in a situation where "a government might claim that its traditions, customs or conditions - for example, religious beliefs, traditional notions of the role of women or even the threat of subversion - permitted it to restrict or abuse the rights of its citizens" (Lee, 1997, p 1). Sen (1999), by contrast, attempts to dissipate the antagonism that has been created by this debate. He argues against the idea that universal human rights only have western roots. Instead, he points out that support for freedom, tolerance and equality can be found within a broad spectrum of Asian traditions where "the roots of modern democratic and liberal ideas can be sought in terms of *constitutive* elements, rather than as a whole" (1999, p 234). While these values often existed side by side with their opposites, and were in general not applied equally to women or slaves, he argues that the belief that the idea human rights (such as freedom and tolerance) are a modern western invention cannot be substantiated.

This field of study has a bearing upon rights-based approaches to development, which some academics and members of religious traditions criticise for relying upon understandings of rights that are located in secular liberalism (Tomalin, 2006a). It has been argued that in a developing context people are more likely to relate to discussions about rights when they are grounded in their own religious-cultural traditions (Peach, 2000, 2005). However, some studies that look to religious traditions to support human rights thinking do not take account of the extent to which these interpretations of tradition are likely to have relevance in practice. For instance, while all religious traditions can be interpreted to support the idea of equal human rights, such an ethic may be at odds with the ways in which people understand and invoke their religion in daily life. This presents a good example of the difference between religious studies and theology. Exegesis of the possible ways in which religious traditions can apply themselves to different social situations is a theological enterprise (so-called 'constructive' work). Religious studies scholars are more likely to be concerned with the extent to which such interpretations reflect what people actually do or believe in.

### **3.2.2 Gender, religion and women's development**

One of the critiques of the phenomenological method in religious studies is that it can be interpreted to imply that scholars should not apply any critique or analysis to religious traditions. For feminist

scholars of religion this is problematic, since it is the very deconstruction of religious traditions according to their patriarchal biases that is the focus of study (see the essays in King, 1995). Feminist scholars of religion are interested in the ways in which religious texts and traditions have developed to reflect patriarchy and the ways in which women, and men, are seeking to re-interpret their traditions in line with more egalitarian values. This area of study has been concerned with the impact of patriarchal religion in both the North and the South, and attempts to be particularly sensitive to the fact that many women in the developing world would not choose, or would not be in a position to reject, their religious traditions. Studies have tended to focus on two areas: the ways in which religious traditions limit women's life chances and the ways in which women are reinterpreting their traditions as a source of empowerment. Within this literature we find consideration of a range of themes, from the role of women in religious organisations to the interplay between religious values and women's human rights.

There are a number of volumes that provide an overview of the impact of different religious traditions upon women's lives (e.g. Eck and Jain, 1986; Cooley et al. 1991; Holm and Bowker, 2000; King, 1987). There is one study that concentrates upon *Women, Religion, and Development in the Third World* (Carroll, 1983), although the author works in development and not religious studies. This raises a more general point about the overlap between different disciplines in approaching the topic of 'women and religion'. In reality there is much in common between the ways that scholars of religion would approach this topic and those of people working in other disciplines (e.g. sociology, gender studies, politics or anthropology). What links these different disciplines in their analysis of women and religion is a reliance upon 'gender analysis' as relevant to understanding how religion impacts upon women's lives. Nevertheless, there is a tendency here – as in other areas concerned with 'gender' – to focus upon women at the expense of investigating the ways in which the relationship between women *and* men perpetuates gender inequalities. Correspondingly fewer studies investigate men/masculinities and religion (e.g. Raines and Maguire, 2001; Ouzgane, 2006).

### **3.2.2.1 Religion, feminist critique and women's empowerment**

Studies of particular religions and their impact upon women's lives have been written from the perspective of all the major religions, reflecting the particular concerns that have arisen within different contexts. This research has taken place within religious studies as well as other disciplines. This literature is concerned with both the oppressive tendencies of religious traditions towards women and the ways in which women are reinterpreting their religious traditions as a source of empowerment.

The extent to which religion can limit women's empowerment has been well documented: from the reluctance of some forms of religion to allow women to assume positions of responsibility within religious and social institutions, to the ways in which religious values often define women in terms of their domestic responsibilities. Nevertheless, while institutional religion can legitimise values and rules that disempower women, the importance of religion in the lives of millions of poor women across the globe means that secular feminism is often perceived not only as western but also as lacking cultural relevance (Peach, 2000).

In response, rather than rejecting religion for its inherent patriarchy, styles of 'religious feminism' have emerged. These argue for re-interpretations of religious systems that are consistent with the 'core' values of the tradition as well as various types of feminist thinking. Such a strategy is attractive to women who wish to employ a religious narrative to guide their politics of empowerment rather than relying upon the secular rhetoric of mainstream (western) feminist discourses. While we should be sceptical about research which depicts poor, non-western women as essentially religious, or which reduces gender oppression to religious or cultural causes, an increased sensitivity to the role of religious and cultural factors in shaping gender relations is a welcome shift in development theory and practice.

With respect to sub-Saharan Africa much of the literature comes under the heading 'feminist theology'.<sup>25</sup> It reflects the attempts of African women to interpret Christianity not only from a feminist perspective but also from the point of view of their Africanness (e.g. Fabella and Ouyoye, 1988; Landman, 1995; Oduyoye, 2001; Oduyoye and Kanyoro, 1992).<sup>26</sup> With respect to African Tradition Religion (ATR), Gleason's (1992) work on the Yoruba goddess Oya draws attention to female empowerment through religion (although this work is partly Afro-American in focus). Studies on women and witchcraft in ATR draw attention to both the ways in which witchcraft is often a source of violence against women as well as a strategy that they can employ to enhance their situation. Adinkrah (2004) writes about witchcraft accusations and female homicide victimisation in contemporary Ghana and Ogembo (2006) about this in Gusii, southwestern Kenya. By contrast, the work of Dolan (2002) points to the use of sorcery by women against their husbands to regain some of their former status and power within the family: "witchcraft discourses are a vehicle through which gendered struggles over

contract income are articulated and contested, and through which the social costs of agrarian transition become apparent” (2002, p 659).

Moving from sub-Saharan to North Africa, we find a focus upon women and Islam, this being one of the key areas in which ‘Islamic feminism’ has developed (e.g. Mernissi, 1991a, 1991b, 1996, 2003). While I have not located many studies on ‘religious feminism’ that investigate women and Islam in sub-Saharan Africa (Mack and Boyd, 2000), Islamic feminism in North Africa, the Middle East or South Asia has given rise to numerous articles and books. Writing on women and Islam increasingly focuses upon the rise of ‘Islamic feminism’ (a feminism that is compatible with Islam) and how this is manifesting itself in various places (Ahmed, 1992; Moghadam, 2002). A range of gender concerns within Islamic contexts have a ‘religious’ dimension, including polygamy (Ali, 2003), female genital mutilation<sup>27</sup>, human rights (see below), veiling (Ali, 2003; Ahmed, 1992; Cooke, 2002; Yegenoglu, 2002); ‘honour killings’ and the implications of Shariah law (Adamu, 2004; Benedek et al. 2002; Jamal, 2005; Kalu, 2003; Miles, 2003; Mullally, 2005; Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987) There are organisations throughout the Islamic world that seek to mitigate the impact of particular interpretations of Islam that are oppressive towards women through offering alternative readings of the texts and traditions. Foley (2004) and Sleboda (2001), for instance, write about the work of the feminist Shariah lawyers within ‘Sisters in Islam’ in Malaysia.

Finally, I will consider literature on women and Indic religions in South Asia (Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism). With respect to the Hindu tradition, there are studies that are concerned with the ways in which the tradition is oppressive towards women, as well as its potential for empowerment. Concerns that are taken up, within both religious studies and other disciplines, include: religious ideas of female bodily functions and pollution; religious attitudes towards childbirth (Chawla, 1994; Samuel and Rosario, 2002); women and Hindu Nationalism (Sarkar, 2001; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995; Basu and Jeffery, 1998); *sati* (Hawley, 1994; Mani, 1998; Sharma, 1998; Lesley, 1991); female infanticide, sex selective abortion and son preference; and dowry and dowry death (Narayan, 1998; Rudd, 2001; Oldenburg, 2002). The edited volume by Samuel and Rosario (2002), *The Daughters of Hariti*<sup>28</sup>, comprises a collection of essays looking at childbirth and female healers in South and Southeast Asia. Chawla<sup>29</sup> (1994) similarly is concerned with the role of the traditional midwife in India, who makes use of styles of religious magic and goddess worship in her work. The literature on women and Hindu

nationalism is concerned, on the one hand, with the ways in which the Hindu right in India promotes particular gender stereotypes of women as wives and mothers (of the sacralised nation – as the goddess *Bharat Mata*/Mother India - as well as of their children) (Basu and Jeffery, 1998; Sarkar, 2001; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995). On the other hand, the literature also discusses the use of the image of the warrior goddess *Durga* as an empowering symbol for women to engage in nationalistic activity, including acts of violence (Bacchetta, 1993; Hildebeitel and Erndl, 2000; Kovacs, 2004). With respect to the Hindu tradition, the above the studies draw attention to the role of female deities (positive and negative).

The practice of *sati*, the tradition of a widow sacrificing herself on her husband's funeral pyre, has also received attention. The extent to which this is actually a 'Hindu' practice is debated. While there is a popular myth that is commonly invoked to support *sati*, it is not explicitly mentioned as an injunction in any of the religious texts. However, while *sati* is not a widespread practice in India, it does receive consideration within discussions of religiously based violence against women in India. These discussions are also typically concerned with dowry violence, female infanticide and sex selective abortion. What is relevant here is whether and how such practices are linked to Hinduism. Some scholars draw attention to son preference in the Hindu tradition as creating a cultural devaluation of the feminine, that does not necessarily cause violence against women but which makes it difficult to successfully address it (Robinson, 1999). Others, however, are critical of this tendency to talk about violence against women in India as though it is 'death by culture' (Narayan, 1997; Rudd, 2001). It is argued that this detracts from identifying more central reasons for violence (e.g. the perversion of the dowry<sup>30</sup> system that means that poor people cannot afford to have daughters or that wives are murdered if their families cannot provide large enough dowries). Narayan (1997) suggests that 'death by culture' is an orientalist discourse, and she points out that domestic violence in the USA, for instance, is never considered in terms of cultural explanations.<sup>31</sup>

With respect to the Sikh tradition, there has been less academic study of women's position than within Hinduism. Two academics (Doris Jakobsh and Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh) have been interested in the roles that women take within the tradition and have tended to dominate the field (Jakobsh, 2003, 2006; Singh, 1993, 2005). Jakobsh emphasises that, in contrast to other religious traditions (Hinduism in particular), Sikhism treats women more or less equally to men. This stems back to the origins of the

tradition and any slippage from this position she attributes to the corrupting influence of Hinduism (2006, p 187). For example, she discusses an article on a popular Sikh website that tells us

“...women have the *right* to become *granthis* (custodians of *gurdwaras* who also act as caretakers of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs), *ragis* (professional musicians of kirtan), and *panj piaries* (the five beloved who administer the initiation rite), but there is no mention of the fact that women rarely, if ever, become *granthis* or *panj piaries*. Moreover, in many *gurdwaras*, a married Sikh woman is not allowed to partake in the *Amrit* (initiation) ceremony, unless she is accompanied by her husband. Further, while women are encouraged to cook, clean, and wash dishes for the Sikh communal meal (*langar*), in many cases they are not permitted to enter the sanctorum of the temple, the special chambers where the copies of the Guru Granth Sahib are placed, known as the *Sach Khand*... While the occasional woman may break cultural barriers and become one of the ‘beloved five’ in the local Sikh *gurdwara*, she will generally do so only in the company of an all-woman *panj piare* within the confines of the *istri sabha* or all-women’s gathering. (Jacobsh, 2006, p 188).

Jacobsh’s article then proceeds to discuss a recent controversy at the Golden Temple in India, the holiest Sikh shrine, where two British Sikh women (both of whom were *amritdhari*, ‘initiated’) were not allowed to participate in the Sukhasan procession. This is a ritual in which the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh scripture) is taken from its public platform and carried to its nightly resting place. Kaur Singh, in her article ‘Why did I not light the fire? The re-feminisation of ritual in Sikhism’, is also interested in the way in which women are marginalised from central Sikh ritual, in this case the lighting of her parent’s funeral pyre. She points out (2000, p 64-70) that “the rituals that exist now are rituals of patriarchy, which have created a false consciousness. Sikh women have come to lean on male figures in their communication with the divine and to depend on father figures for their strength, instead of searching within. They do not publicly question women’s omission from Sikh rites of passage, nor do they celebrate women’s affirmation in their sacred literature”.

The majority of the scholars discussed above are not only interested in the marginalisation of women within their religious traditions for reasons relating to the quality of their religious practice and opportunities for spiritual development; they also suggest that religion is linked in complex ways to women’s broader status in society. However, just as religious traditions may influence social attitudes that oppress women, there are also many instances where there are attempts to transform aspects of religious traditions to support women’s development. The following section will look more closely at



women and leadership in religious traditions, and will consider its relationship to women's development.

### **3.2.2.2 Women and leadership in religious traditions**

A key challenge faces 'religious feminists' in that women rarely occupy the positions of status and authority in religious traditions that would enable them to challenge misogynistic tendencies. One argument that is found in religious feminist literature concerns the limited extent to which women can challenge and transform negative attitudes unless they are able to occupy the same or similar positions of status as men in their traditions. Moreover, it is often the case that religious traditions are interpreted to prohibit women's participation in politics or other public bodies or do not encourage it. This raises questions about the role of women in religious organisations, as well as the limits that religion places upon women's ability to have a political voice. It is with respect to Islam that the relationship between women's political participation and religion has received most attention. There is also a body of literature that discusses women's ability to be ordained to the same level as men or perform the highest religious functions within a tradition.

Within Christianity, apart from the Orthodox and Catholic churches, in particular, most other denominations have accepted women's ordination as priests. While in some contexts (regions as well as particular parishes) this innovation has not been well received (and in effect women do not ordain at all or much less often than men) in others, women priests have been welcomed.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, although women have received ordination in many cases we cannot assume that they are therefore active supporters and campaigners for women's rights and greater equality with men. It would be interesting to examine the relationship between the existence of female leaders in religious traditions and the extent to which a particular community actively seeks female empowerment. The issue of women's ordination is also an important issue within the Buddhist tradition. From the very beginning (circa 550 BCE in Northeast India), the Buddha envisaged the need for a 'fourfold *sangha*' (community) consisting of fully ordained men and women (*bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*) as well as lay men and women (*upasaka* and *upasika*). However, although the Buddhist canon indicates that the Buddha established both female and male monastic orders, within the Theravada and Vajrayana tradition the *bhikkhuni* ordination died out (although it continues to flourish in Mahayana contexts, such as Taiwan, to this day). Opposition to its reintroduction largely depends upon the belief that it is

necessary to have both male and female ordinands present at a *bhikkhuni* ordination and since there are no remaining *bhikkhunis/bhikshuni* (in Theravada and Vajrayana) the lineage is extinct and it is impossible to revive.

In Thailand, for instance, women may ordain as white robed *mae chis*, but only observe eight precepts and are mainly occupied in caring for the day-to-day needs of the monks. The *mae chi* institution is not mentioned in the Buddhist texts, in fact its exact origins are unclear, (Lindberg-Falk, 2000, p 45) and many are critical that it is a poor substitute for the *bhikkhuni* ideal. The living conditions of a *mae chi* are often inadequate, they have little opportunity for study of the *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings) and the majority live in temples, where they cook and clean for the monks (Muecke, 2004). This is a good example of a situation where a religious tradition can be interpreted to support equality (and in this case there are even corroborating historical precedents), yet patriarchal gender hierarchies have compromised best practice. So while, in theory, the Buddha's teachings are gender neutral and women have been allowed access to more or less<sup>33</sup> the same positions of status and authority as men, the tradition as it has been lived and practised does not typically treat men and women the same. In particular, the Buddhist teaching of *kamma/karma* (pali/Sanskrit) is often taken to mean that women are a lower rebirth than men. As I have illustrated in a recent paper (Tomalin, 2006b), this understanding has been linked to women's inferior social status in Buddhist contexts.

While the central teachings of Buddhism can be considered gender neutral (since they concern the ways in which the individual – regardless of sex – may overcome *dukkha*/suffering) the actual practice of the tradition has not been gender equal. In many instances, women have been denied equal ordination rights with men and pervasive across Buddhist traditions is the idea that women are a lower rebirth than men. The marginalisation of women within the Buddhist tradition, particularly within Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism, where women have not been able to fully ordain, has led some to make links between the gender hierarchies in Buddhism and wider socio-cultural discrimination against women. One way of strengthening women's position within the tradition as well as within society, it is argued, is to allow women the same ordination rights of men.<sup>34</sup> With women in positions of leadership, it is suggested, they are more likely to be able to challenge negative stereotypes held about women, as well as to provide positive role models. For instance, the *bhikkhuni* ordination has been recently revived in Sri Lanka and there is a movement in Thailand to do the same there (although

it faces fierce opposition). A strong theme within this movement is the argument that gender hierarchies within Thai Buddhism have a broader cultural impact upon social attitudes that disempower women. As van Esterik writes, Buddhism is a “key component of Thai identity” providing “a way of viewing the world, a sense of reality, moral standards, and a shared language and metaphors for analyzing their existing life situation” (2000, p 65-66; Peach, 2005, p 124). Buddhism reinforces the understanding that women are a lower rebirth than men because of *kamma* acquired in previous lives (Owen, 1998) and “women are socialised to be relational, socially embedded and family oriented rather than independent, autonomous, self-determining individuals” (Peach, 2005, p 124). This intrinsic inferiority of women is reinforced within the structure of everyday public Buddhist practice and custom:

“Men perform all the public roles of Buddhism, ordained as monks or as lay officiants, leading the chanting, conducting rituals, and participating as members of the *wat* (temple) committee. In addition, the organisation of space in the meeting hall clearly denotes the differential status distinctions between monks and lay persons, elders and younger people, and women and men. Monks sit upon a raised platform, denoting higher status. Elderly men sit closest to the monks, followed by younger men. Women sit around the perimeter. The elderly men make merit by placing food in the monks’ bowls first, followed by the younger men. Not until the youngest boy has made his offering will the most elderly woman lead the other women to make their offerings” (Klunklin and Greenwood, 2005, p 48).

Many advocates of the *bhikkhuni* ordination consider that there is a very direct relationship between the low status of women in Thai Buddhism and the inferior status of women in Thai society, which places them at risk of abuses such as domestic violence and sex trafficking, as well an increased vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. There is a body of literature that examines the relationship between Thai Buddhism and women’s oppression in Thailand, particularly with respect to the issues of sex trafficking and HIV (Klunklin and Greenwood, 2005; Peach, 2000; 2005; Thitsa, 1980). For instance, as the activist and writer Khuan Kaew suggests:

“One of the core causes of violence against women has not yet been touched upon – the beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and values that come out of a patriarchal society influenced by Buddhism itself...in the discussions at the local, national and international meetings of women organizations the root causes of prostitution have always been poverty, western models of development and modernization...Hardly mentioned as a cause of prostitution is the lack of leadership roles for women in Buddhism” (2002, p 16).

In Thailand the only formal religious option available to women is life as a white robed *mae chi*. As Puntarigivat argues “the replacement of *mae chi* by a *bhikkhuni* institution would greatly raise women’s status at the core of Thai culture and would begin to address many of women’s problems in Thailand – including poverty, child abuse and prostitution” (2001, p 225). The reasons that girls and women enter prostitution in Thailand are complex, and researchers are likely to point to the lack of educational and economic opportunities for poor females, as well as the demands of a profitable sex-tourism industry. However, the tendency of Buddhist teachings not to view sex work as immoral or degrading removes much of the stigma associated with similar work in many other cultures (Peach, 2005, p 125). In Thai culture prostitutes are not viewed with universal negativity and in the Buddhist texts we find stories about prostitutes, often as friends of the Buddha. Moreover, as Peach tells us, one popular attitude towards prostitution in Thailand is that it enables women to earn money that they can give as donations to monks. This provides them with an opportunity to earn merit in order to improve their *kamma* for a better rebirth in the next life (i.e. as a man), implying that women are considered to be less important than men (2005, p 125). Thus, “traditional Thai Buddhist culture functions to legitimate the trafficking industry, and thereby deny the human rights of women involved in sexual slavery” (Kabilsingh, 1991, p 67; see also Muecke, 1992; Puntarigivat, 2001, p 227; Peach, 2000, p 65; Satha-Anand, 1999).

Some women within Tibetan Buddhism are also campaigning for full ordination rights as an important means of transforming the status and opportunities for (not fully ordained) nuns as well as lay women. There is an interesting transnational aspect to these campaigns. For instance, the women involved in the *bhikkhuni* movement in Thailand are linked to broader networks of Buddhist women in both Thailand and abroad. On an international level, the Thai or Tibetan *bhikkhuni* movement reflects a broader campaign to secure equal ordination rights and status for women across Buddhist traditions.<sup>35</sup> In contexts where religious beliefs, discourses and practices continue to have a strong public appeal, strategies to empower women within these traditions have a relevance for development.

In Sikhism and Hinduism there is not the same understanding of ordination as in the Christian or Buddhist traditions. In the Sikh tradition there is no ordained priesthood and any (male) Sikh can lead the congregation or become a Granthi (an individual who looks after the Guru Granth Sahib). However, as discussed above, these roles are rarely undertaken by women (Jakobsh, 2006). Within Hinduism,

the only categories of people who can function as priests are men born in the Brahmin caste. Women are absolutely prohibited from this role. It has also been the case that women have traditionally been excluded from the study and exegesis of Sanskrit texts within a religious context (they can of course study them as an academic subject).<sup>36</sup> There have, however, been examples of women religious poets and leaders within Hinduism.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, there are several recent studies of women renunciates or *samnyasins* (Rustau, 2003; Denton, 2004; Khandelwal, 2004; Khandelwal et al, 2006). Rustau (2003) discusses women *samnyasinis* in the Ramakrishna Math.<sup>38</sup> She notes that this organisation is quite rare in India, since women are not normally allowed to participate at the same level as men in religious institutions. The organisation later became independent from the Ramakrishna Math and was called the Sri Sarada Math.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike Christianity and Hinduism, there are no positions of priesthood in Islam. The Imam is an individual who leads prayer in the Mosque and it is normally men who perform this role for male audiences and mixed sex audiences. Women normally lead prayer for female congregations and some debate currently exists about whether women should be allowed to do this in mixed congregations (Karolia, no date). However, probably more significant from the point of view of women's empowerment in Islam is the extent to which women are permitted to interpret the Shariah. While Islam itself does not forbid women from interpreting the religious law, in many Islamic contexts women do not occupy the position of clerics. Women's input into exegesis of the Shariah is felt to be particularly important where the law is interpreted in ways that discriminate against and oppress them.<sup>40</sup> Within 'Islamist' contexts, women's ability to interpret and challenge religious law has a broader political significance, since where the state follows Shariah, women do not have protection from discrimination by secular, liberal legal instruments (such as human rights frameworks).

## 4 Conclusion

This literature review has concentrated upon the relationship between religion and social difference. This is not the only area relevant to development that has attracted the interest of religious studies, but is broad enough to allow consideration of some key research topics. Hence, it is a selective rather than comprehensive overview of religious studies approaches to development. Notable issues that have not been dealt with include secularisation, migration and diasporas, multiculturalism and globalisation: these have however been discussed in some of the other literature reviews produced for the RaD programme. This review has also aimed to distinguish the methodological approach of religious studies from approaches to the study of religion typically found in other disciplines. This type of methodological discussion is important because religious studies typically asks different questions about a particular topic (e.g. religion and social difference) to political science or sociology. As I have suggested, religious studies methodology involves (1) attempting to empathise with believers and to understand as closely as possible their beliefs and experiences and (2) a focus upon what is distinct about particular religious teachings and beliefs (in order to explain, for example, why particular religions have certain impacts that others do not). This approach is useful to a religions and development research agenda, since it could help to interpret differential patterns of social, economic and political change as a product of religious beliefs and values in particular contexts; it can help understand the nature of different types of FBOs, the work they engage in and the extent to which they are likely to engage in cooperative initiatives; it can account for barriers to social change where they are the result of normative religious values; and it can assist in understanding and predicting the situations in which religion can act as a force for positive social change.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> That religious phenomena have non-supernatural i.e. 'natural' causes. These could be social, biological, political etc.
- <sup>2</sup> A useful reading list on 'religious studies' is available at <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/pdf/rel100jacobsbibliography.pdf> accessed 9/2/07.
- <sup>3</sup> The study of Christian theology developed within western institutions but is now studied and taught across the globe. Today the term theology is sometimes also applied to the study of religious traditions other than Christianity when it is undertaken by 'insiders' and adopts a 'confessional' perspective.
- <sup>4</sup> For introductions to these different approaches to the study of religion see: Dillon Handbook of the Sociology of Religion (2003); Fenn The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion (2003); Banton Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion (1966); Bowie The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction (1999); Glazier (1997) Anthropology of Religion: A Handbook; Davies An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (2003); Parsons and Jonte-Pace Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain (2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Critics argue that 'functional' definitions are too broad, since there are conceivably many 'non-religious' phenomena that could perform the function of religion. By contrast, substantive definitions are often criticised for being too narrow and potentially leaving out much that is 'religious'. Moreover, substantive definitions can be problematic, since they are invariably based upon western understandings of what a religion should be, fitting within a Judaeo-Christian framework. Scholars such as Fitzgerald (2000) have criticised the very idea of 'religion' itself as an inappropriate use of a western way of dividing up certain cultural phenomena that is not replicated in other cultural contexts..
- <sup>6</sup> There is a body of literature that discusses the extent to which 'orientalist' discourse actually invented eastern religious traditions. See for instance: Almond The British Discovery of Buddhism (1988); Fitzgerald Hinduism and the World Religion Fallacy (1990); Halbfass India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding (1981); King Orientalism and Religion (1999); Kopf British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance (1969); Marshall The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century (1970); Masuzawa The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism (2005); Pennington The Invention of Hinduism: Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion (2005); Peterson and Walhof (eds) The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History (2002); Singh Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogue: 'Discoveries' of India in the Language of Colonialism (1996); Spickard et al. (eds) Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion (2002).
- <sup>7</sup> See: Smart Concept and Empathy: Essays in the Study of Religion (1986); The Phenomenon of Religion (1978); The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions (1973). He is also well known for taking a broad substantive definition of religion within which he famously includes Marxism as a type of religion. See The Religious Experience of Mankind (1977) or Dimensions of the Sacred (1996).
- <sup>8</sup> This volume, edited by Sutcliffe, marks the 50th anniversary of the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR). It comprises a "selection of papers originally given by British, European and African scholars at conferences of the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR) from the early 1990s to 2002" (Sutcliffe, 2004, p xvii).
- <sup>9</sup> Connolly (1999) contains essays on other approaches to the study of religion, including sociological, psychological and feminist approaches.
- <sup>10</sup> He sees the existence of religious studies departments as little more than 'convenient administrative units' (McCutcheon, 1997; 2003). Unlike Fitzgerald he does not necessarily think that religious studies should disappear, but considers that it needs to re-think its methods in order to survive as a separate discipline.

- <sup>11</sup> Thus, religious studies scholars are considered to be apologists for the truth behind religious belief, even though when they claim to be 'value-free'.
- <sup>12</sup> Interestingly, McCutcheon adopts a naturalistic approach to religion, yet does not extend this to denying the possibility that non-empirical entities or events could exist (1997, p ix). This suspension of judgment is a version of the phenomenological view that we cannot verify or falsify certain religious claims. This is also the position adopted by the social constructionist Peter Berger, who argues that a reductionist position that denies the possibility of the existence of non-empirical facets of religion is inconsistent with the scientific study of religion: "The scientific study of religion must bracket the ultimate truth claims implied by its subject...If science means anything at all, as distinguished from other types of mental activity, it means the application of logical canons of verification to empirically available phenomena. And whatever else they may be or not be, the gods are not empirically available, and neither their nature nor their existence can be verified through the very limited procedures given to the scientist. What is available to him is a complex of human experience and thought that purports to refer to the gods" (cited in O'Toole, 1984, p 40).
- <sup>13</sup> See also Smith, 1995, 1998; McCutcheon, 1997.
- <sup>14</sup> See also Smith (1998). This is part of a broader critique of the category 'world religions' and of substantive definitions of religion in general.
- <sup>15</sup> There is a substantial literature within religious studies on caste and Hinduism e.g. Bayly, 1999; Beteille, 1969; Dumont and Sainsbury, 1970; Joshi and Minority Rights Group, 1986; Lannoy, 1971; Lynch, 1969; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994; Singer et al. 1968; Srinivas, 1962; Wiser et al. 1989.
- <sup>16</sup> I am thinking here of the role of the Church in South African apartheid – both supporting as well as critiquing (Elphik and Davenport 1997; de Gruchy 2004; Protzesky 1990).
- <sup>17</sup> A useful place to look for articles and research on religious fundamentalism are the four volumes of the 'Fundamentalism Project' edited by Marty and Appleby (1991-94): *Fundamentalisms Observed: A Study Conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Human Rights* (v. 1 1991); *Fundamentalisms and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education* (v.2 1993a); *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance* (v. 3 1993b); *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements* (v. 4 1994). See also the literature review in this working paper series *Gender Studies Approaches to the Relationships between Religions and Development* for a discussion of 'fundamentalism' (Tomalin, 2007).
- <sup>18</sup> See [http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/Internet/hedgehog\\_viol\\_bib.htm](http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/Internet/hedgehog_viol_bib.htm) for a bibliography on religion and violence (accessed 9/2/07).
- <sup>19</sup> Jihad means 'holy war' and has been interpreted to literally mean a war against opponents of Islam. Alternative meanings include the notion of an 'inner' spiritual struggle or the scholarly study of Islam to counter 'evil'. Hindutva and Ramrajya are terms associated with Hindu nationalism. Hindutva means 'Hinduness' – what it means to be a Hindu – and Ramrajya is the 'rule of Ram' (see Mehta 2004).
- <sup>20</sup> Despite the heterogeneity within Asian or Eastern cultures, certain 'idealised' features are stressed in comparison to the west. In particular, the west's emphasis upon individualism and autonomy is felt to be at the expense of community, duty and responsibility.
- <sup>21</sup> The states that participated were mostly but not exclusively Asian: Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, China, Cyprus, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Japan, Kiribati, Kuwait, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Vietnam. See: <http://193.194.138.190/html/menu5/wcbangk.htm#l> (accessed on 9/2/07) for the report on the meeting and the declaration.



- <sup>22</sup> <http://193.194.138.190/html/menu5/wcbangk.htm#l> accessed on 9/2/07.
- <sup>23</sup> Lee, however, criticises the relativism of the 'Asian' nations for being "inconsistent and confusing in the sense that they accepted, on the one hand, universal human rights in general terms and, on the other hand, emphasized the legitimacy of a different understanding and practice of human rights arising from different historical, cultural and religious traditions" (1997, p 3).
- <sup>24</sup> Waltz (2002) challenges four 'myths' about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The first 'myth' is that the UDHR was a response to the Nazi Holocaust, the second that the UDHR had the support of the 'Great Powers' (USA, UK and USSR), the third that the UDHR had a single author (i.e. that it excluded Asian participation) and the fourth that the US had/has an unwavering commitment to international human rights. She argues, "few are aware of and appreciate the substantial contributions of small states to the construction of the Universal Declaration" (2002, p 444). For instance, she states that it was under pressure from Hansa Mehta, an Indian contributor, that the phrase 'All men are born free...' was changed to 'All human beings are born free'. Whilst the examples given by Waltz do indicate the participation of 'small states' in the formulation of the UDHR, she does not really address the issue of power relations within and between countries (i.e. who was representing who at the original round of meetings and debates). Even if participation was encouraged at the start, we must ask ourselves why have such 'myths' become prominent and what they tell us about the balance of power in international relations. Do some states reject the idea of universal human rights because they do not believe in human rights, or does their attitude reflect other issues and concerns?
- <sup>25</sup> See also Sackey (2005), who examines various aspects of the position of women in African independent churches. I am not suggesting that 'feminist theology' as such is produced by religious studies scholars but that it is part of religious studies' subject matter.
- <sup>26</sup> Similar studies from Latin America include Aquino, 1993; Aquino et al. 2002; Aquino and Fiorenza, 2000, and from Asia, Kwok, 2000. See also Russell et al. 1988.
- <sup>27</sup> See Tomalin, 2007.
- <sup>28</sup> Hariti is the ancient Buddhist goddess of childbirth, once important throughout much of Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia.
- <sup>29</sup> Chawla is founder of an NGO called MATRIKA (Motherhood and Traditional, Resources, Information, Knowledge and Action) see <http://www.boloji.com/wfs5/wfs537.htm>
- <sup>30</sup> While the practice of dowry in India was traditionally a practice of upper caste Hindus, it is now widespread amongst other castes and other religious traditions.
- <sup>31</sup> See the Indian journal Manushi, edited by Madhu Kishwar, for material on women, religion and development-related issues.
- <sup>32</sup> See Sackey, 2005. It would be useful to undertake a detailed literature review of the position of women priests in India, Tanzania and Nigeria in order to ascertain their influence on religious teachings and the social roles of religious organisations.
- <sup>33</sup> The reason that I say 'more or less' here is to draw attention to the fact that from the outset women had to follow more rules than men (in the Theravada women had 311 rules compared to the 227 for monks). Women also had to follow an additional 'eight special rules' (garudhammas). Some argue that this implies an inferior status, while others draw attention to the content of some of these rules that are said to protect women.
- <sup>34</sup> Even in contexts where women are allowed full ordination rights they still suffer discrimination within both Buddhism and society. Thus, some women within these contexts are also campaigning for improved conditions and a transformation in gender oppressive ideologies supported by Buddhism that have an impact upon social attitudes towards women.
- <sup>35</sup> For instance, in July 2007 in Hamburg, 'The First International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages' was held; there is an annual award

ceremony for 'Outstanding Women in Buddhism' that has been held since 2002 on International Women's Day at the United Nations in Bangkok; and there is an international Buddhist women's organisation called Sakhyadhita that holds a conference every other year

<sup>36</sup> See Laurie Patton (2002) 'The prostitutes' gold: women and Sanskrit education in one corner of India.

<sup>37</sup> Female bhakti (devotional) poets Mirabai and Lala; modern saint Ammachi (Abbot 1985; Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988).

<sup>38</sup> Samnyas means 'to renounce'. In traditional Hinduism it referred to those men of the upper three classes who at the end of their lives renounced the world in order to achieve moksha (liberation from rebirth) upon death. In the Ramakrishna Math samnyasins are those who have committed their live to seva (service) for the movement.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.srisaradamath.org/activities.htm> The Sri Sarada Mission would be an interesting topic for study with respect to development activities, for example the centre in Indore, Madhya Pradesh.

<sup>40</sup> See <http://www.boellnigeria.org/shariadebatesupdate.html>

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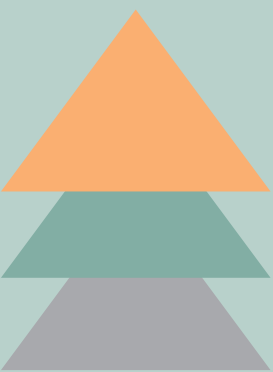
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